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AUTHOR Cillessen, Antonius H. N.; Hubbard, Julie A.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined high-aggressive and low-aggressive boys' ratings of the effectiveness of aggressive and assertive strategies for solving social problems involving hypothetical peers and actual peers. Subjects were 66 third-grade boys (11 groups of 6 boys each for a total of 22 high-aggressive, 22 low-aggressive, and 22 average aggressive boys) who participated in a series of 5 play sessions and interviews. After the fifth play session, each boy rated each of his five play partners' aggressiveness on a five-point scale. In the interviews, boys were read stories in which a social conflict with a hypothetical or actual peer was described. For each story, each boy evaluated whether he would achieve a nonsocial goal (instrumental effectiveness) and whether the hypothetical or actual peer would want to be his friend if he used an aggressive strategy or an assertive strategy to solve the conflict. Results indicated that outcome expectations did not differ when boys rated the instrumental effectiveness of aggression for solving social problems with hypothetical peers. However, when the boys rated the instrumental effectiveness of aggression for solving social problems with actual peers, high-aggressive boys more frequently believed that aggression would help them to achieve their own goals than did low-aggressive boys. (MM)

Instrumental and Social Outcome Expectations of High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Boys

Antonius H. N. Cillessen and Julie A. Hubbard

Duke University

Authors' Address:

Department of Psychology: Social & Health Sciences

Duke University

P.O. Box 90085

Durham, NC 27708-0085

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Abstract

When 22 high-aggressive and 22 low-aggressive boys rated the instrumental effectiveness of aggression for solving social problems with hypothetical peers, their outcome expectations did not differ. However, when these same boys rated the instrumental effectiveness of aggression for solving social problems with actual peers, high-aggressive boys more frequently believed that aggression would help them to achieve their own goals than low-aggressive boys did. One explanation for this finding is that high-aggressive boys display a bias in their evaluation of the effectiveness of aggressive behavior. A second hypothesis is that high-aggressive boys actually experience greater instrumental efficacy of aggressive behavior in interactions with other children. The second hypothesis was supported by the finding that 22 average-aggressive boys rated the instrumental effectiveness of their own behavior as significantly lower with high-aggressive boys than with low-aggressive boys.

Introduction

The component of the social information processing model that has received the least research attention with regard to aggressive children concerns the evaluation of the effectiveness of potential responses to social problems (Dodge & Feldman, 1990). In those studies that have been conducted, aggressive children have been found to evaluate competent (i.e., assertive) strategies less favorably and incompetent (i.e., aggressive) strategies more favorably than non-aggressive children, both in terms of instrumental outcomes and social outcomes (Dodge, 1986; Deluty, 1983; Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986). However, these effects have not been as strong as expected given the hypothesized central role of outcome evaluation in social interaction. One reason for the moderate size of these effects may be that they have usually been based on children's expectations of the effect of their behavior on hypothetical peers, as opposed to the peers with whom they actually interact. The purpose of this study is to examine high-aggressive and low-aggressive boys' ratings of the instrumental effectiveness of aggressive and assertive strategies for solving social problems involving hypothetical peers and actual peers. In addition, ratings of the social effectiveness of aggressive and assertive strategies will also be considered. It is hypothesized that high-aggressive boys will differ from low-aggressive boys in their evaluation of the efficacy of aggression to a greater extent when responding to stories about actual peers than when responding to stories about hypothetical peers.

The finding that high-aggressive children believe that aggressive behavior will be more effective in social interaction than low-aggressive children is usually labeled as a "bias" on the part of the high-aggressive children. However, it is possible that this response pattern is less a bias than a reflection of reality. That is, high-aggressive children may actually experience more success when they use aggression to achieve their goals in interactions with other children than low-aggressive children do. A further test was planned in order to determine whether the higher expected effectiveness of aggression on the part of high-aggressive boys has a basis in reality (rather than merely being a response bias). Average-aggressive boys will evaluate their own ability to achieve instrumental goals when interacting with high-aggressive and low-aggressive boys. It is hypothesized that average-aggressive boys will rate their own efficacy as lower when interacting with high-aggressive peers than when interacting with low-aggressive peers.

Method

Subjects were 66 third-grade boys who participated in a series of five play sessions and interviews in eleven groups of six familiar boys each.

Aggression Classification of Subjects

After the fifth play session, each boy rated each of his five play partners' aggressiveness on a 5-point scale. Boys were then rank-ordered within play groups according to their average aggression rating received from peers. The two highest ranking boys in each group were labeled high-aggressive (n = 22), the two lowest ranking boys were labeled low-aggressive (n = 22), and the remaining boys formed the average-aggressive group (n = 22).

The mean aggression ratings received for each group were M = 3.55 (SD = .61) for high-aggressive boys, M = 2.53 (SD = .50) for average-aggressive boys, and M = 1.79 (SD = .45) for low-aggressive boys (all means were significantly different from one another). As a manipulation check, groups were compared on the standard "starts fights" nominations received from all classmates in sociometric interviews conducted as part of a larger project. The means for the three groups were M = 1.07 (SD = .76) for high-aggressive boys, M = .48 (SD = .80) for average-aggressive boys, and M = -.10 (SD = .68) for low-aggressive boys (all means were significantly different from one another).

Interview Measures

In the first interview, subjects were read four stories in which a social conflict with a hypothetical peer was described. For each story, each boy evaluated whether or not he would achieve a nonsocial goal (instrumental effectiveness) and whether or not the hypothetical child would want to be his friend (social effectiveness) if he used an aggressive strategy and if he used an assertive strategy to solve the conflict. The number of times across stories (range 0-4) a boy expected to achieve his goal with each strategy yielded a score for the instrumental effectiveness of aggression and assertion, respectively. The number of times a boy expected that the peer would want to be his friend yielded a score for the social effectiveness of each strategy.

In a separate interview, subjects were read six similar conflict stories. For each story, each boy was now asked to assess the instrumental effectiveness of aggression and assertion if these conflicts occurred with each of the five actual peers from his play group. For each peer, each boy rated how likely it was that he would achieve his goal with aggression and with assertion on a 4-point scale. A mean rating across stories was computed for the instrumental effectiveness of each strategy in interactions with each peer.

Results

Instrumental Effectiveness Ratings of High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Boys about Hypothetical Peers

For stories involving hypothetical peers, the instrumental effectiveness ratings of high-aggressive and low-aggressive boys for aggressive and assertive strategies were compared in a 2 (Aggressiveness of Rater) x 2 (Strategy) ANOVA. A main effect for strategy was found. Boys rated assertive strategies as more instrumentally effective than aggressive strategies, F (1, 42) = 35.13, p < .001. High-aggressive and low-aggressive boys did not differ in their ratings of instrumental effectiveness with hypothetical peers, and no interaction was found. See Figure 1 for an illustration of this effect.

Results

Social Effectiveness Ratings of High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Boys about Hypothetical Peers

For stories involving hypothetical peers, the social effectiveness ratings of high-aggressive and low-aggressive boys for aggressive and assertive strategies were compared in a 2 (Aggressiveness of Rater) x 2 (Strategy) ANOVA. A main effect for strategy was found. Boys rated assertive strategies as more socially effective than aggressive strategies, F (1, 42) = 190.58, $p < .001$. High-aggressive and low-aggressive boys did not differ in their ratings of social effectiveness with hypothetical peers, and no interaction was found. See Figure 2 for an illustration of this effect.

Results

Instrumental Effectiveness Ratings of High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Boys about Actual Average-Aggressive Peers

For the analysis of boys' ratings about actual peers in their play group, two factors needed to be taken into account. First, we needed to control for the actual level of aggression of the rated boys. In order to do so, high-aggressive and low-aggressive boys were compared on their ratings of the same average-aggressive peers. Second, subjects are nested within play groups. Thus, in order to control for general behavioral differences between the groups, the rater aggression factor (high vs. low) was specified as a nested factor within play groups.

Instrumental effectiveness ratings for actual peers were then compared in a 2 (Aggressiveness of Rater) x 2 (Strategy) ANOVA. A main effect for strategy was found. Boys rated assertive strategies as more instrumentally effective than aggressive strategies, F (1, 22) = 29.25, $p < .001$. A main effect for the aggressiveness of the rater was also found. High-aggressive boys rated both strategies as more instrumentally effective than low-aggressive boys, F (21, 22) = 2.08, $p < .05$. Both main effects were qualified by a significant aggressiveness of rater x strategy interaction, F (21, 22) = 2.89, $p < .01$.

The interaction can be explained in two ways. First, high-aggressive boys rated aggressive strategies as more instrumentally effective than low-aggressive boys, F (21, 22) = 3.38, $p < .01$; however, high-aggressive and low-aggressive boys did not differ in their ratings of the instrumental effectiveness of assertive strategies. Second, low-aggressive boys rated aggressive strategies as less instrumentally effective than assertive strategies, F (1, 11) = 36.39, $p < .001$; however, high-aggressive boys did not differ in their ratings of the instrumental effectiveness of aggressive and assertive strategies. See Figure 3 for an illustration of this effect.

Results

Instrumental Effectiveness Ratings of Average-Aggressive Boys about Actual High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Peers

Average-aggressive boys' instrumental effectiveness ratings of aggressive and assertive behavior with high-aggressive peers were compared to their ratings of the effect of aggressive and assertive behavior with low-aggressive peers. The rater aggression factor (high vs. low) was again specified as a nested factor within play groups. This analysis consisted of a 2 (Aggressiveness of Ratee) x 2 (Strategy) ANOVA. A main effect for strategy was found. Average-aggressive boys rated assertive strategies as more instrumentally effective than aggressive strategies, F (1, 11) = 59.52, $p < .001$. A main effect for aggressiveness of ratee was also found. Average-aggressive boys rated their own instrumental effectiveness as lower when responding to stories that involved high-aggressive boys than when responding to stories involving low-aggressive boys, F (1, 11) = 35.34, $p < .001$. These two effects were qualified by a significant aggressiveness of ratee x strategy interaction, F (10, 11) = 3.91, $p < .05$.

This interaction can be explained as follows. First, average-aggressive boys rated their own instrumental effectiveness as lower when responding to stories involving high-aggressive peers than when responding to stories involving low-aggressive peers, both when using aggressive strategies, $F(1, 11) = 46.39$, $p < .001$, and when using assertive strategies, $F(1, 11) = 12.24$, $p < .01$. However, the difference was more pronounced for aggressive strategies than for assertive strategies. Second, average-aggressive boys rated their own instrumental effectiveness as lower when using aggressive strategies than when using assertive strategies, both with high-aggressive peers, $F(1, 11) = 48.58$, $p < .001$, and with low-aggressive peers, $F(1, 11) = 16.14$, $p < .01$. However, the difference was greater for high-aggressive play partners than for low-aggressive play partners. See Figure 4 for an illustration of this effect.

Discussion

Most measures that assess the social-cognitive processes of children have utilized stories about hypothetical peers. In studies using these measures, findings have been equivocal regarding the relationship between childhood aggression and the evaluation of aggressive strategies as effective. This equivocality may be an artifact of children's responses to stories about hypothetical peers, since children may not respond in ways that reflect their actual behavior and cognition accurately to stories about hypothetical children. The results of the current study support this contention. High-aggressive and low-aggressive children did not differ in their assessment of the instrumental efficacy of aggression when responding to stories about hypothetical peers; however, high-aggressive children evaluated aggression as more instrumentally effective than low-aggressive children when responding to stories about actual peers. It is possible that the use of actual peers, as opposed to hypothetical peers, in research on the social-cognitive processes of aggressive children may lead to stronger findings for all components of the social information processing model.

The current view of aggressive children is that they display deficits and biases in their processing of social information. Thus, the tendency of the high-aggressive children in this study to assess aggressive behavior as being effective would be considered a bias. However, it is possible that aggressive children actually experience greater success in achieving instrumental goals when they use aggression than other children do. Their increased success may be the result either of differences in their display of aggression or of their reputation. In the current study, average-aggressive children believed that they would achieve their own instrumental goals less frequently when interacting with the high-aggressive boys than when interacting with the low-aggressive boys. This finding provides some indirect support for the view that high-aggressive children are evaluating aggression as effective not because they are biased, but because this evaluation reflects their own experience.

Figure 1
Instrumental Effectiveness of Aggressive and Assertive Strategies of High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Boys for Problems With Hypothetical Peers

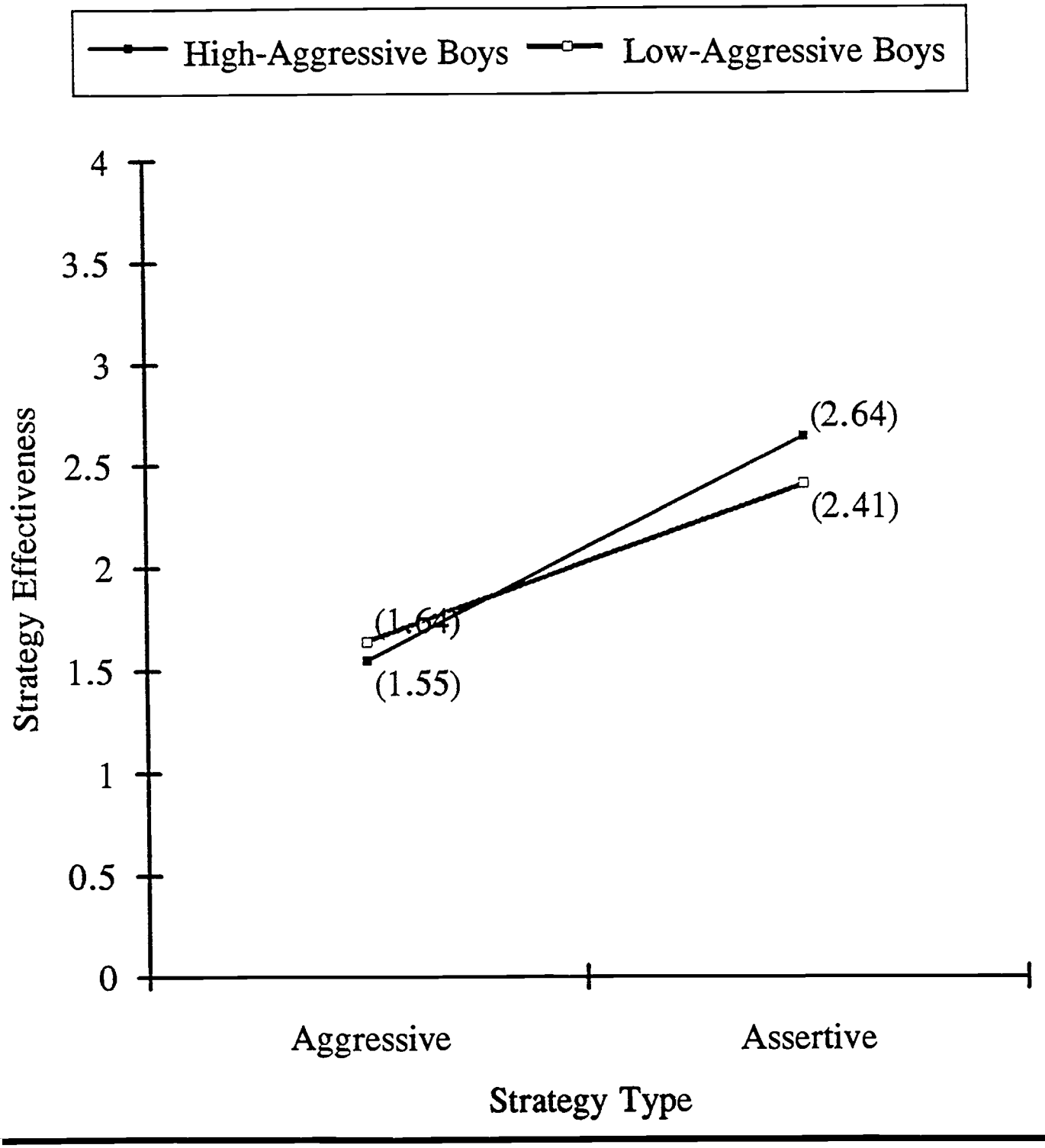

Figure 2
Social Effectiveness of Aggressive and Assertive Strategies of High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Boys for Problems With Hypothetical Peers

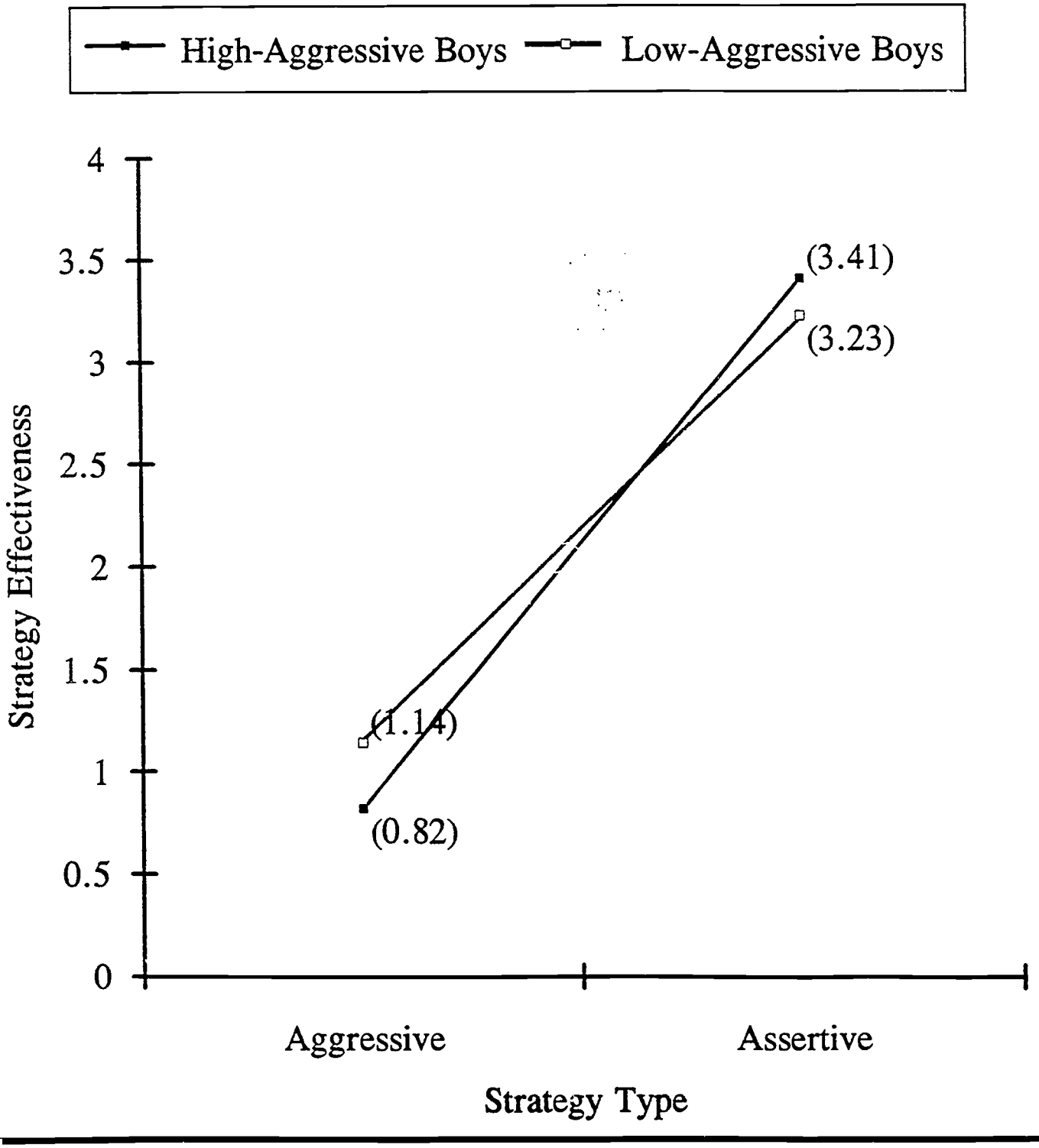

Figure 3
Instrumental Effectiveness of Aggressive and Assertive Strategies of High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Boys for Problems With Average-Aggressive Actual Peers

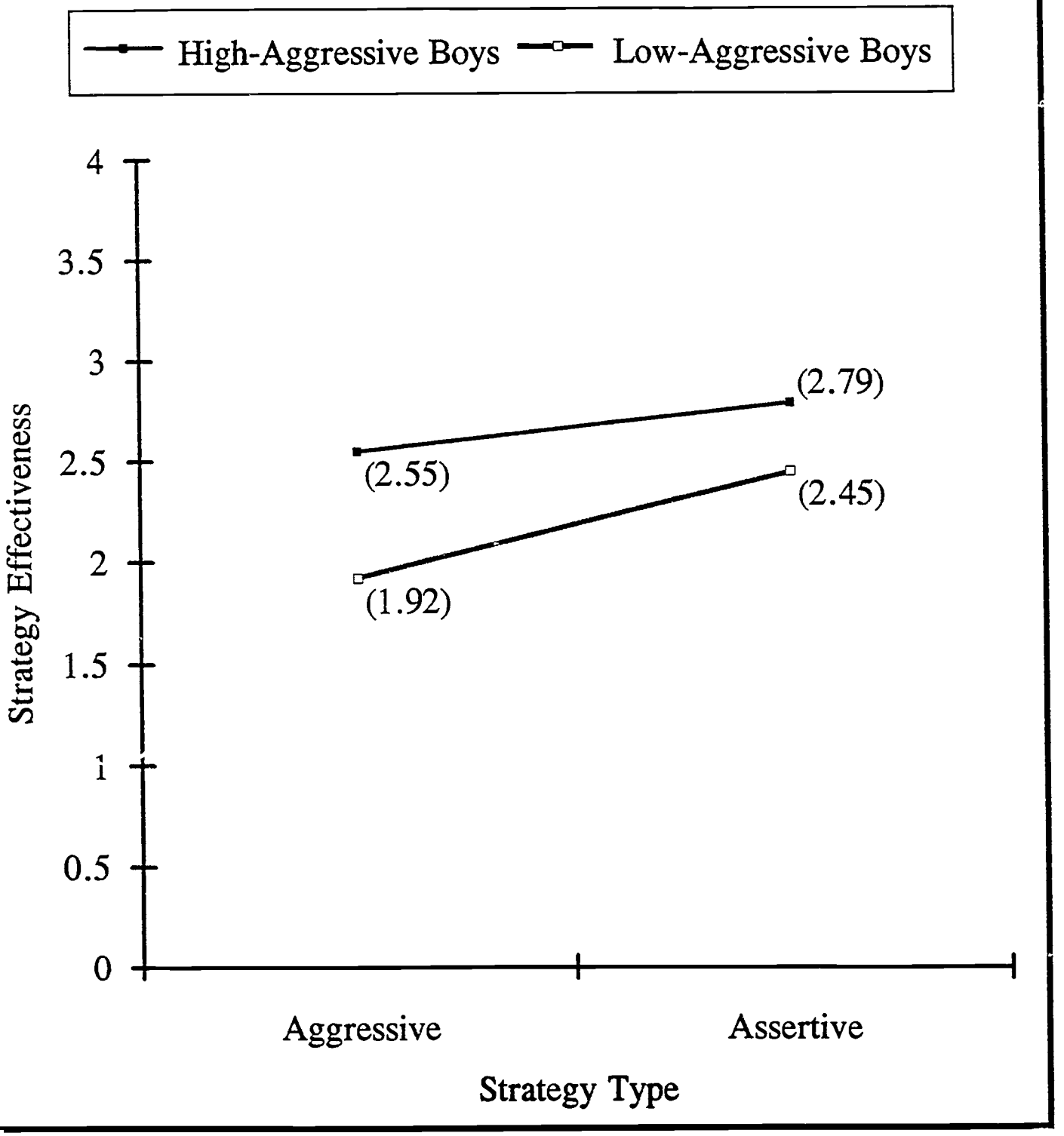

Figure 4
Instrumental Effectiveness of Aggressive and Assertive Strategies of Average-Aggressive Boys for Problems With High-Aggressive and Low-Aggressive Actual Peers